



Serbia and the US – difficult times ahead?

by Zsófia Szilágyi

Despite the US government's recent announcement to lift the 11-year-long economic sanctions on Serbia and Montenegro, bilateral relations between the two countries will be complicated by the growing political turmoil in Serbia. Eight months after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, the country is facing both a severe political power vacuum and a spiralling economic crisis, and the imminent priorities most probably will not include cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague – a key condition for US financial assistance.

Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic's cabinet has recently struggled against dwindling support in the parliament, where one-time allies have teamed with ultra-nationalists, conservatives and Slobodan Milosevic's socialists in a bid to unseat the government. In mid-November, Zivkovic requested the dissolution of the parliament, and agreed to early elections after the opposition threatened to hold a vote of confidence on the government. Following the third failed attempt to elect a new Serbian president, the November 18 dissolution of the senior coalition party DOS, and given the increase of the radical nationalist threat – for now, the government is unlikely to consider handing over more people to The Hague.

Through that they risk losing key US assistance, and if nationalists return to the government in the December 28 elections, the country might also miss out on further aid from international institutions, EU countries and NGOs. Since 2000, Serbia has relied heavily on donations for its post-conflict recovery, and has received funds totalling 3.5 billion euro from various donors. The US Congress releases an annual list, requiring the Belgrade authorities to meet stringent criteria to avoid a cut-off of US economic assistance. Such funds have been frozen or delayed several times in the past few years. (Humanitarian and democracy aid has been exempted from such conditionality.)

Meeting the US criteria has been complicated by the fact that Serbia's nationalist and reformist political elite has long been divided over the issue of cooperating with The Hague. Many leading politicians, including former Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica, have viewed the Court merely as an institution to further US foreign policy goals, and the country saw several major political crises arising from dealings with the Court, particularly the 2001 coup by Djindjic to hand over Milosevic.

The arrest of General Ratko Mladic, who is wanted for his role in the 1995 Srebrenica massacres, has also been a long-standing, and particularly contentious issue between Serbia and the Court. According to some observers, Djindjic was, in fact, shot because he gave his word to deliver Mladic. Ever since, the weak Serbian government has not found the strength to arrest the General, and its relations with the Court turned from bad to worst by late autumn. In October, the announcement of four new indictments by The Hague angered Serb politicians, among them Zivkovic, who described the indictments as a "drastic violation" of an informal agreement between the ICTY and Belgrade. The two parties have allegedly agreed that new war crimes cases would be tried by the newly established Serbian Special Court for War Crimes, but The Hague denies the existence of any such agreement.

Serbian leaders also cried foul when news arrived of what they call the latest "double standard" in the US and The Hague's dealings with the Kosovo war. In late October, the Slovenian police arrested Agim Ceku, a former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commander and head of the Kosovo Protection Corps (TMK), on charges of war crimes committed against Serb civilians. Despite the Interpol warrant, issued by Serbia, Ceku was soon released following the direct intervention of the head of the UN Mission in Kosovo. Belgrade has long argued

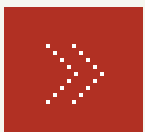
that The Hague's failure to indict former KLA commanders and former Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegovic was proof enough of its double standards.

According to Daniel Serwer, the Director of the Balkan Initiative at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, Serbia has chosen a poor strategy in its dealings with the Court. He told a 2002 conference at the Belgrade-based International Institute of Politics and Economics that "Serbia has done itself no favour by dragging out the process, every six months looking for the minimum [...]. This has taught the Americans that nothing will happen unless they insist." Serwer was directly involved in arranging US government funds for civil society development and democracy promotion in Serbia in 1998. In his speech entitled "Serbia and the Balkans: An Unofficial American View", he argues that working with the Court is in Serbia's self-interest as the process "enables victims to see justice done, and removes the burden of guilt from [the] entire population."

According to Serbian opinion polls, a large majority of Serbs think that the US attitude toward rump Yugoslavia is generally negative. They also believe that the international community did not have the right to interfere in the country's internal problems. However, the reformist government of Djindjic, and later Zivkovic, recognized that cooperation with the US is unavoidable to secure funding for badly needed democratisation and economic reforms. (Currently, the economic conditions are so poor in Serbia and Montenegro that Serwer claims it would take the country twenty years to reach the current European GDP per capita level, even with a rapid, 5% annual growth.)

But despite earlier pledges to work with the US, bilateral political relations have not been without incident. The Belgrade government continues to dispute the legitimacy of the UN mandate in Kosovo, and is reluctant to negotiate with the province's elected leaders. In March 2002, a major diplomatic row broke out when a US diplomat was arrested in Belgrade, along with the Serbian Deputy Prime Minister, Momcilo Perisic, on suspicion of spying and revealing military secrets. Relations further soured when Belgrade admitted in November 2002 that it had sold military equipment and services to Iraq in violation of the UN arms embargo. In late 2002, it was also alleged by the US Embassy in Belgrade that Yugoslav companies and experts provided assistance for Iraqi and Libyan missile development programs.

At a time when the Serbian government is paralysed by allegations of corruption, human rights abuses and political infighting, Daniel Serwer's transcribed speech is an interesting contribution to the debate on Serbian-US relations. While touching upon the volatile political and social situation, the speech offers solutions on how the internal tensions could be eased. One of its central conclusions is that Serbia needs to exorcise its demons and start communicating with Kosovo, as the fate of the Southern province will always remain an obstacle before Serbia's own democratic development. "The way I see it, no one is standing in Serbia's way – the real limits on what [the country] can achieve lie not in the international community, but in Belgrade," he said in one of his concluding remarks.



Article referred to

Daniel Serwer, 'Serbia and the Balkans: an unofficial American view', Institute of International Politics and Economics, 2002

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